



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Technologies of transmission

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Comment on LEMONNIER, Pierre. 2012. *Mundane objects: Materiality and non-verbal communication*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

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What can material objects achieve that words alone cannot? More precisely, in Pierre Lemonnier's own terms, "What gives a central role to particular objects at a given time in the nonpropositional evocation of events, values, or core of all-important representations? Why does such a set of ideas, social relations, and practices lend itself to being called forth in that material way?" (2012: 99). His response to these questions, which unfolds over the course of this constructively provocative book, is that objects—and artifacts especially—are qualitatively distinct from other forms of social production in terms of their capacity to "assemble" and communicate different registers of inference. As a historian, my attention is drawn immediately to the emergent or processual qualities of Lemonnier's questions: What kinds of changes over time are envisaged in the roles of objects, such that a "given time" must be stipulated; and what exactly transpires in the act or process of "being called forth"? How do material objects operate within the spectrum of a particular sensorium; and how are techniques, practices, and responses communicated or transmitted through time and space?

The critical initial distinction, signaled in Lemonnier's title, is that between mundane and ritual objects, although we learn that differences between the two are matters "of degree, and not of nature" (2012: 147). Mundane objects are shown to exhibit many of the attributes conventionally associated with ritual paraphernalia: like ritual objects, artifacts such as fences, eel traps, and drums strategically materialize stories of ancestors and powers, "render visible the pillars of the social order," and play a critical role in the "making, thinking, and reproduction of particular social relations" (2012: 59).

Anga sacred bundles (*oremere* for Ankave, *kwaimatnie* for Baruya) are comprised of assemblages of human or nonhuman remains, nuts or seeds, and stones



that collectively constitute “composite images of ancestral beings” (2012: 122). Each bundle is unique, in terms of both its composition and its historical association with the descendants of a particular ancestral figure; it is “the quintessence of the group’s culture and identity” (2012: 79) and, not surprisingly, features centrally in male initiations. Other bundles, strikingly similar in appearance but without the items associated with named ancestors, are used in hunting magic but within a much more restricted social arena. What both forms of bundle achieve, along with the construction and use of fences, eel traps, and drums, is the condensation or integration of multiple avenues of sensory perception “as a way to express, build, and recall key aspects of the local social organisation, cultural values, and system of thoughts, as well as their interrelations” (2012: 37). In an instructive detour, Lemonnier extends his analysis to vintage racing cars, showing how a community of enthusiasts is assembled around the knowledge, sounds, and especially the sheer physicality of the cars and their miniaturized model forms.

Mundane objects are thus not ordinary but rather “pseudo-ordinary,” identified as “mundane” only along a continuum of communicative acts and their objects, and to the extent that they act to integrate different inference systems. In this respect, ritual and mundane objects are not qualitatively distinct, for “the anchoring of a mixture of representations and practices in a strategic communicative artefact is *only reinforced*—not created—by the appearance of supernatural beings” (2012: 156, original emphasis). Deployed in this way, both mundane and ritual objects serve as “strategic” objects or “resonators,” their efficacy being established and enhanced through the accumulation of redundancy—of multiple means toward similar ends—a productive repetition or “perissology” which acts to extend the reach of the resonator and reinforce the intended message. Anga drums are archetypal (and literal) resonators, with the range of senses engaged in both their construction and performance precipitating the condensation of multiple domains of social life.

(As an aside, from the perspective of a disciplinary outsider, the very range of synonyms and euphemisms employed here in reference to the process of condensation—“gathering together,” “bringing together,” “assembling,” “bundling,” “blending,” “integration,” “fusion,” “assimilation,” “synthesis,” “blurring of boundaries,” “this mixing of what we separate”—is itself perissological, serving to underscore the labor involved in reversing the inherited separations of anthropological description and analysis.)

As one might expect of an anthropologist of technology, Lemonnier mounts a strong defense of the primacy of materiality in his understanding of the process of condensation, positioning objects as “fundamental to the stability of the sociocultural configuration” (2012: 129). In their plasticity, objects offer an ideal anchor for understanding condensation: “People do not merely look at such objects. They produce them, manipulate them, and perform material actions with them, such as piercing the nose, rubbing bodies, transplanting cordylines, making noise, shaking a tapa, etc.” (2012: 98).

What is less evident is the precise nature of the interactions that Lemonnier identifies as critical between these material anchors and the other sensory modalities engaged in acts of evocation, the “images, sounds, infrasounds, smells, exhaustion” (2012: 131), that envelop and collectively overwhelm the resistance of participants. There is a risk that our privileging of the material both demarcates

in unproblematic fashion the boundary between the tangible and intangible, and obscures similar plasticity and complexity in the production of other sensory effects, such as the more subtle evocations of sound or smell. Material objects certainly afford the readiest access to apprehension and analysis, but, in the absence of comparable efforts to understand the contributions of the other senses, they cannot independently unpack the opaque interactions at the heart of condensation.

Lemonnier is clear about the limits of his present inquiry when he concludes, “I do not know the precise cognitive relations between such an artefact and the actors, except that several of their senses are involved” (2012: 131). The scale of the challenge of contextualizing engagement with material objects within a comprehensive description of Anga aesthetics across each of the senses is immense, though Steve Feld (1982) has accomplished a corresponding portion of the task in his demonstration of the scope for a Kaluli acoustemology. It is perhaps telling that Lemonnier’s most complete sensorial or synaesthetic account is that of his own engagement with racing cars and other enthusiasts, in which the respective contributions of the lightness of Perspex, the squeal of tires, the smell of burned oil, and the infrasound of large engines are evidently essential, if imperfectly understood.

Of course, the advantages of the material are particularly evident for questions of history and process, and most especially in the realm of the mundane, in which artifacts are inherently conservative, preserving their form from one action to the next while the reproduction of techniques that produce them and accompany their performance is often subject to an emphasis on faithfulness. Objects are durable, not just in the conventional material sense but also in terms of their embeddedness in social practices.

Is it the case then that resonators “play a unique role in the particular kind of communication that is crucial to the *stability* of social systems” (2012: 167, my emphasis), or is it that they are critical to the reproduction and even modification of those systems, even where local exegesis insists on “stability”? If drums and model vintage cars communicate, they also educate and inculcate—that is, they communicate through time and space, or between generations and communities. In the case of a performance, the seemingly individual acts of “making the artefact, using it, and ‘knowing’ the mythology that goes with the artefact and the ritual are one and the same thing” (2012: 139), but this is unlikely to be true of their sequenced transmission or revelation to a novice. (Why else would you have initiations?)

History is evidently at play in the practices that surround Anga material objects, and Lemonnier signals this repeatedly. Alongside the requirement of a general theory of Anga aesthetics and synaesthetic process, he indicates the need for something like a model of Anga historicity, in its broad sense as a cultural logic of history (Ballard 2014): a local theory of history that accounts for the nature and trajectory of change and that might provide “a glimpse of *the joint transformations of the role of an object and that of the social relations in which the object participates*” (2012: 152, original emphasis). As Lemonnier envisages it, the accumulation and convergence of minor modifications over time produce transformation in an object and its associated practices. However, “transformation” is a slippery term in historical analysis, for it commonly (and certainly in my own writing) flags the recognition rather than exploration or explanation of historical process; a deferral or refusal of inquiry into the specific causes and circumstances of change.

It's when things fall apart (racing cars, for example) that we get to see most clearly how they're put together in the first place, and the references to the loss and replacement of Anga material objects provide clues to their original constitution. While the elements of ordinary or mundane magic bundles are readily and easily replaced, ritual bundles (which are not produced but derive from the viscera and bones of the First Man), once lost or stolen, are effectively removed or retired from the ritual sequence. Certain of their functions may be substituted for by the remaining available ritual bundles (a nice instance of redundancy as insurance), but, despite their superficial similarity to mundane bundles, they are individually unique and thus irreplaceable. Loss has sparked innovation in at least one instance, where clay soaked in the blood and awls made from the bones of named and relatively recent Ankave ancestors have assumed the status of a lost sacred bundle. But if mundane and ritual objects are visually indistinguishable, they are not technologically similar, for there exists a *chaîne opératoire* for one but not the other, which is sacred precisely because its production is limited to a single First Man and a single generative event; it is not capable of being reproduced, but has instead a historical specificity or, in Tok Pisin, *nem* (literally name or individual renown). Under the terms of Anga historicity, mundane objects are essentially copies of original sacred forms and technologies (rather than ritual objects being exceptional instances of a mundane technology), and the question of what transforms a mundane object into a perissological resonator is essentially back to front. What new objects must require, then, is novel mythology, or at least a radical reinterpretation of existing mythology.

If we approach the communicative function of material objects not in a generalized sense but rather in terms of practices of transmission, we are confronted with further—and I think highly productive—questions about who gets to learn what, how, and from whom, about the roles of verbal and nonverbal instruction, and about the ways in which the operation of condensation gels for individuals over time and with experience. Mapping communication or transmission through space provides a necessary corollary to tracking the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and technologies, while addressing what appears to be a particular emphasis in Anga society on spatiality; the trade in drums, the tenurial claims of fences, and the variable settlement patterns associated with eel trapping all point to an alternative frame for understanding the deployment of material objects, and to the ways in which spatiality and temporality condense and are communicated as historicity.

Lemonnier's account of Anga fences, in particular, inspires me to reflect further on the many functions of the deep drains and ditches of the Huli landscape, which are the subject of considerable historical contestation as well as aesthetic appraisal. Lengthy Huli genealogies identify and situate historically the individual original excavators of drains, weaving together human and landscape histories. Initiation cycles formerly involved being presented with an idealized landscape, with drain networks produced in miniature in mud, but this same ideal landscape has also been a weapon of colonization, reproduced in newly settled territories to assert their fundamental unity with the homeland. To clear or reexcavate a Huli drain is to summon up an extraordinary range of conscious and unconscious technologies, aesthetic reflections, and historical references.



There is no pretense at closure in the present book, but rather the sense of a conversation open at one end toward future questions and projects, and at the other to the reexamination of one's own assumptions and the reinterrogation of original fieldnotes and observations. This, in miniature form, is the very model of the Anga drum as a strategic resonator, and confirmation of Pierre Lemonnier's status, across very many conversations, as himself a consummate perissological resonator.

## References

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